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Accidental Octopus

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

I head to the ocean for inspiration. Diving deep, the diverse organic shapes and fluidity of the flora and fauna inspire me to create modular pieces that incorporate intricate line work. This repetitive line and patterning gives me peace and helps me meditate. This self-exploration has opened up a stimulating world that pushes me to produce prints and silver jewelry that are individual and introspective. I have learned that the journey has become the aspiration and the production, a gift.

Accidental Octopus

Introduction

When I was a child, I spent a week with my family at the beach every summer and then spent more time throughout the year at the Eastern Shore. My childhood dreams led me to believe that I could be an “oceanic archeologist”, my title for a person who dives for sunken treasure. I watched hours of PBS documentaries focused on the ocean and the life under the waves. The undersea explorer and filmmaker, Jacques Cousteau (1910-1977), was someone I looked up to. If you took me to an aquarium, I plan to spend hours gazing through the acrylic walls. I always imagined that I would have some sort of career involving the water and explorations into its depths.

My first career choice was to become a biology teacher. I found it interesting but challenging. While studying biology in college, I kept art close to my heart by filling my living space with my own artwork. Art became the priority in my life, so I switched my focus from biology to art and transferred to a school in the mountains, away from the ocean, where I finished my degree in art education.

As a classroom teacher, I envied the learning that I witnessed in my students. They inspired me to pursue higher education and become a co-learner. I discovered that Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) offered an off-campus master’s program and I applied, was accepted, and then enrolled. While studying in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program, I rediscovered my fascination for the ocean and the creatures that thrive there. All of the aquatic animals are attractive to me but one creature inspires me more than the others, the octopus.

During my coursework, I focused on the octopus, its form, and its features in my printmaking and jewelry.

Aesthetics

Unknowingly, at first, the octopus squeezed its way into every media that I used. I dove into finding out more about these intelligent cephalopods and other members of their family. I learned about one type of octopus that could change its body in surface texture, pattern, and shape. Its skill in transformation was an exciting characteristic that I explored in printmaking and jewelry. Eventually, the octopus became my muse. If I wasn't using the whole animal in an artwork, I was drawing a tentacled-arm or a pattern of repetitive suckers. I also incorporated abstracted fluid and curving lines, or spirals, which reflected the movements and forms the octopus could take. Through the use of lines and repetitive patterns, I created images that helped me express ideas about fluidity and included meditation and reflection as part of my process.

I often initiated an artwork with an undulating line. Creating this type of line was meditative for me as I followed its rolling motion up and down and around into a spiral. I found that this organic and intuitive line resembled the curving tentacles of octopi. With my interest in this species, I found it a perfect model for essentials in my compositions, whether in jewelry or printmaking.

In my jewelry, I used Precious Metal Clay (PMC) to create my pieces. The malleability of this silver clay allowed me to create fluid forms in keeping with the features of sea life. The steps taken to transform the raw silver clay into a piece of jewelry are small and unassuming until they are released from the kiln in a fury of heat,

water, and finishing. This process reminded me of an octopus waiting and making small movements toward a goal of survival, with the sudden explosion of movement in the capture of a small crustacean.

In printmaking, I was intrigued with the fine lines and layers that could be created. I also explored various techniques, such as etching, chine-collé, monoprints, and collage. In creating the etching plates for printing, I drew smaller details than I could with any paint brush. These minute lines let me focus on the texture and patterns inspired by the skin of the octopus. The fields of color produced in the monoprints and etchings allowed me to develop environments for the octopus. With the combination of the dry point prints and monotypes in chine-collé, I either showcased the octopus as an animal to be noticed or one that is expertly camouflaged. This attention to the octopus, and its environment and habits, was a way for me to develop compositional structures, color palettes, and mark making approaches.

Both jewelry making and creating prints required time when incorporating intricate details. These small details included fluid, repetitive patterns that allowed my mind to wander away from the daily world and lose myself in the design. My mind meandered through what I encountered in my daily life and I revisited events that I might have missed in the harried pace of the hours in the day. I noticed that my thinking process was very similar to an octopus's activity of revisiting locations where it has been successful in searching for prey. Not only does it sit and wait for food, it searches the ocean floor exploring small crevasses that may have been missed by others on identical missions. In my meditative state, like the octopus, I explored and re-explored my daily thoughts and ideas.

Influences

The first artist that I was drawn to was Henri Matisse (1869-1954) because of his use of bright contrasting colors in his painting and prints. Bold planes of colors fill the spaces in his landscapes and interior views. With his unconventional use of bright, pure color, he broke the traditional rules of painting at the time and became known as one of the Fauves, or *wild beasts*. During the time that he created these paintings, it was uncustomary to add shocking, high-key, non-naturalistic colors to portraits or landscapes. This practice was alarming to the artistic community as it did not follow traditional conventions of painting at the time.

In Matisse's painting *Open Window at Collioure* (1905), he painted a water scene as viewed through an open window. The sailing vessels in the center are framed by the window and interior of a room. He punctuated the image with high-saturated, complementary colors of reds and greens, and purples and oranges. The brushwork is gestural and suggestive of surfaces and forms. Matisse said, "I feel through color so it is through it that my canvas will always be organized." (Néret, 19). It is this intuitive response to color that I incorporated in my process. I also used Matisse's approach in pairing complementary colors to create a sense of movement or visual excitement. Large areas of overlapping complementary color fill the surfaces of my works.

Another artist that captured my attention was Alexander Calder (1898-1976). He was an artist who also focused on bright, high-saturated color in his abstracted paintings. Although I was attracted to his use of color, his wire work influenced the way I handled my jewelry. Calder is known for his development and use of the *mobile* and

stabile as an art form. The mobile is a suspended structure that was created to be a kinetic artwork that is moved by air currents in the environment in which it is installed. Whereas, a stabile is a static structure of massive size constructed from similar metal and composed with similar forms and shapes as his mobiles. I was especially fascinated by the fluidity that he created in his mobiles. Round-edged shapes and forms, along with loops used for the structures and as connectors, comprise his mobiles which rotate and sway as the air pushes the forms. These sculptures, when lit from above with a strong light, cast shadows on the floor that transform the horizontal plane into another artistic dimension. I used these round-edged forms and wire loops in my jewelry pieces. I also incorporated spirals and other organic shapes to create a feeling of movement. This subtle sense of movement allows my pieces to have what I call a *quiet freedom*.

Recently, I became aware of Japanese artist, Yayoi Kusama (1929-). In much of her artwork she places patterns of polka dots over fields of color. Because of her repetitive imagery, Kusama is strongly focused during her process and, to me, appears to be transfixed in a meditative state when she is painting. Throughout her career, she has covered walls, canvases, and common images with patterns and polka dots in circular arrangements. Her recurring patterns have inspired me to make similar repeating patterns in my own pieces. The act of transforming an empty surface with an intricate, repetitive design empties my mind, and like Kusama, allows me to meditate and refocus daily thoughts.

Jacques Cousteau (1910-1997) was a great influence to me as well. I was entranced by his accented voice as a small child, and he sparked my interest in the life

of the ocean. Known as a filmmaker and a conservationist, he was instrumental in the development of underwater breathing equipment. He lived his life by and for the sea, and shared that passion for his favorite environment with those that would listen.

Listen, I did. I wanted to know more about the ocean and how the rest of the world affected it. I wanted to know about the flora and fauna that thrived there. Lastly, I wanted to share what I knew and learned with others. By taking scientific aspects of the sea life to my work, especially the octopus with its unique survival instincts, I was able to express literal views of ocean life as well as abstracted ideas about fluidity.

The works of these artists have been a part of the development of my artwork. Bright colors, fluid lines, repeating patterns, and ocean life all became aspects of my pieces. I transformed features of these influences into ideas and methods that brought peace, and a quiet freedom, to my creative world.

Jewelry

When I begin a jewelry piece, I have a finished idea in mind. However, it is the process that inspires my imagination. There are many steps that I must complete before I see the final piece. I start by rolling the PMC into thin sheets, and watching how they drape around forms and moulds. This step helps me envision a variety of designs and directions for the piece. Once I have the desired direction, the draped silver dries and the refinement starts. At this point, the process involves alternating between drying, sanding, and applying additional layers and shapes. Slowly, the finished pieces start to emerge. When the piece has been fine-tuned, it is fired in a kiln. After the firing process, the silver is buffed to a high shine and assembled.

In my necklace, entitled *Arms Grow Back Slowly* (Appendix, 1 and 1a), the first step was to create the silver beads. For each bead, I rolled out the PMC to a 2mm thickness and wrapped it around a single piece of puffed rice cereal. The repetitive process, for completing the number of beads needed for the choker length, allowed me to gather my thoughts and plan the pendant for the piece. After the individual pieces of rice cereal were wrapped, they were fired, polished, and strung. Then, I added a thinner strand of freshwater pearls to create a size contrast and add a naturalistic aspect of the ocean.

When I completed the strand, I began work on the attached octopus tentacle. I wanted it to twist around the strand and also appear to have an undulating motion, similar to the movement of a real octopus arm. Rolling another piece of PMC, I draped the silver over a pipe cleaner support to hold the form while it dried. Once dried, I added the texture of the suction cups and definition of the top of an octopus's arm. After firing, I added liver of sulfur, an oxidation treatment, which caused a darker patina to develop on the tentacle. This created a contrast to the high shine of the rice cereal and pearl-like beads. The strands of rice cereal beads, when twisted with the pearls, reflect the light along their edges as bubbles do when they dance to the surface of water. The pearls, with their off-white color, reference the sandy ocean floor.

As a finishing touch, the necklace required a clasp. I chose a toggle clasp design so the piece would be interesting from the front as well as the back. For the raised texture on the circle of the clasp, I used a resist method. I cut out a circular shape and painted polka dots with nail polish over the areas that I wanted to be raised. After the polish dried, I used a wet sponge to remove the top layer of silver. Finally, I placed the

piece in the kiln where the polish was burned off, leaving a textured surface with a raised pattern. Through this multi-step process, I was able to combine my thoughts about ocean life and art into a piece of wearable art.

Next, I created my *Vitreledonella* (Appendix, 2 and 2a). I rolled out and cut several flat planes for the construction of the box itself. Once the frames for the front and back were dry, I added the spiraled coils to the center. Not wanting to leave the sides of the box plain, I used the partial imprint of a stamp with a water pattern to impress into the wet silver. When all six sides of the box were dry, I assembled the structure using silver slip as a glue. This required many sandings of the slip after it dried. I was focused on making the joined areas as seamless as possible. The moment it was sufficiently sanded, I fired the box. After the firing, I added a liver of sulfur treatment and then removed some of it from the faces of the box. This step allowed the blue-green patina, that suggests ocean water, on the inside of the pendant to be seen. It also heightened the wave-like lines of the stamping along the thinner edges. The finished boxy piece mimics the rectangular walls of an aquarium, and the strand of beads suggests the iridescent surfaces of ocean creatures. At this point, I began to name my pieces after the scientific nomenclature associated with my imagery.

I continued learning about PMC as I made *Grimpella Thaumastocheir* (Appendix, 3). For this work, I wanted to more closely reflect the octopus's form. I draped the silver over an ovoid form to make the right and left sides of the body. Then, I joined the pieces of the body using slip as a glue and cut the top off to create a lid and a base. Lastly, I added texture to the surface by layering cut out PMC polka dots and coiled shapes. This required much of my time waiting and allowed me to focus and meditate

while my hands were still. The outcome was a form that resembled a stylized body of an octopus.

In this piece, my work became more detail oriented as I slowed myself down to pay attention to only the areas that needed my immediate focus. This time, the liver of sulfur treatment produced not only blues and greens but also hints of reds in the lower spaces of the body. I removed the dark liver of sulfur from the high spots and brought those areas back to a shine. Lastly, I added a multi-chain tassel to the bottom of the pendant which helps infer tentacles, as well as creates a flowing, fluid movement when worn.

In these pieces, I transformed raw silver into miniature sculptures. The cool blues and greens, produced by the liver of sulfur treatments, reflected the colors found in the ocean. The pop of red that appeared in my final piece implied that beneath the blues and greens of the ocean there were other colorful living creatures. These works helped me see the value of the processes involved in making jewelry. I learned that I had a great amount of persistence and patience which I used for reflection and contemplation. I also wanted the viewer to be aware of my attention to detail, and the importance of the ocean.

Printmaking

In printmaking, I start with a photograph as inspiration. Then, I etch a patterned design into a Plexiglas plate. The plate is inked and wiped in preparation for the press. In the process of chine-collé, which requires attaching various pieces of paper together, I often add an additional decorative paper on top of the receiving paper. The paper is

wetted and wheat glue is sprinkled on the back. The glue adheres the ornamental paper to the print as it is rolled through the press. Many times, at this point, I create a Plexiglas monotype using stencils. This monotype is then rolled through the press on top of the chine-collé for added visual appeal. Finally, I make a ghost print. In this step, the stencils are removed from the Plexiglas plate and the ink that is left on the plate (called a ghost) is inked onto additional paper. As a result, I create two monotypes from one inking. This ghost print is saved and can then be used in a future print.

In my piece *Wunderpus Photogenicus* (Appendix, 4), I used a combination of techniques. First, I used stencils to develop the ground and created a ghost print which helped me achieve a watery field of fluid lines. I then used another stencil to mask around the red color of the sea fan on the left-hand side of the composition. I used a fine line etching of a brain coral, on the lower right, to develop the environment. Lastly, I added the chine-collé of a small octopus in the upper right. In this piece, I layered multiple prints to create the arrangement. This allowed for the unplanned and intuitive placements of the individual aspects. I permitted myself to let go of total control of the outcome which produced a piece that was not thoroughly pre-planned.

In my print, *Hapalochlaena Maculosa* (Appendix, 5), I overlaid fields of complementary colors in a fluid design, and collaged a small octopus in the lower left-hand corner. The octopus mirrors the overall design by holding its tentacles in a similar curvilinear manner. The stenciled colors are the focus of this piece, but the octopus is an added visual element that contrasts in scale, detail, and color to the larger pattern.

In *Dismantle the Aquariums* (Appendix, 6), I continued to use multiple techniques. First, I created stenciled grounds of color and ghost prints. Then, I layered a

collage of large, colored chine-collé octopus tentacles on the central portion of the print. Next, I added a miniature set of black, etched tentacles emerging from the side of one of the arms, towards the upper right corner of the design. In this piece, I let myself focus on the individual elements first, and later I developed the final composition. Doing this let me experiment with the elements and arrange them freely without the pressure of a planned goal. By gathering the writhing tentacles in the center, I made what I considered a bouquet of arms reaching up from the dark undercurrents of the ocean. This print delineates the growth in my work from a more commonly standardized composition to an abstracted and colorful arrangement.

Through this work, I have learned to explore and take more risks in compositional design and in the use of materials. By challenging myself with new experiences, I broadened my ideas and made it easier to express them in my artwork. The intricate patterns and finite details provided me the time I needed to think and reflect on aspects that I would normally overlook. I appreciated this slowing of time because without it I wouldn't have paid attention to the silent sea creature that helped me develop my skills and broadened my fascination with its environment.

Conclusion

During my time as an undergraduate student, art was a minor focus in my life. However, I enjoyed creating and making my ideas concrete, and eventually became an art teacher. At that point, I was inspired to teach. I entered the MIS-IAR Program with the hope of improving my teaching skills. The thought of being a co-learner also pushed me into making my own work again. I found that I missed creating art and

connecting with other artists. Now, I am a better teacher and a practicing artist. Time is on my side and I will gladly use it to reach for my goals in the future.

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Figure 1. *Arms Grow Back Slowly*, Precious Metal Clay, freshwater pearls, surgical steel wire, 18" (necklace length), 7/8"x1/2"x3 1/2" (pendant), 2010.



Figure 1a. *Arms Grow Back Slowly* (detail view), Precious Metal Clay, freshwater pearls, surgical steel wire, 18" (necklace length), 7/8"x1/2"x3 1/2" (pendant), 2010.



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Figure 2a. *Vitreledonella* (detail view), Precious Metal Clay, cotton cord, glass beads, 20" (necklace length), 1½"x1"x½" (pendant), 2010.



Figure 3. *Grimpella Thaumastocheir*, Precious Metal Clay, sterling silver chain, 4"x1"x½", 2012.



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Figure 5. *Hapalochlaena Maculosa*, Monotype and collage, 10"x10", 2012.



Figure 6. *Dismantle the Aquariums*, Monotype and collage, 10"x10½", 2012.

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 Springfield, Virginia

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 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art
 Thesis Exhibition
 Virginia Commonwealth University
 Richmond, VA
 at Ernst Cultural Center
 Annandale, Virginia

2011 *The Power of Color III*
 Gallery West
 Alexandria, Virginia